

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Origins of the Russian State

The tradition of an all-powerful Soviet state, capable of operating irrespective of societal interests, stretches far back into pre-revolutionary Russian history. When discussing the ability of the Communist Party to force changes from above on Soviet society, scholars often conjure up the image of a dictatorial state — rooted in Russian history — which legitimized Stalin's transformation of Soviet society in the 1930s and facilitates the implementation of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms today. On October 6, 1988, in a lecture devoted to the historical origins of the Russian state, Richard Hellie, Professor of History at the University of Chicago, focused on the role of the Muscovite state in the pre-Petrine period from 1450-1700.

The central question of Professor Hellie's discussion was what the Muscovite state could and could not do, and why. In his view, the state did not operate completely independently of interests from below, but once policies had been decided upon, it had "extraordinary latitude to issue orders in its name and to carry them out." Hellie defined the state as those organs which could issue decrees in the name of the ruler and have the authority to execute these laws. In Muscovy, the central figures of the state included the sovereign and his elite servitors, the boyars, and other members of the upper class. "They were the policy-making, power elite of Muscovy."

The primary concerns of the Muscovite state were self-perpetuation and expansion. What was in 1450 essentially a palace administration, with jurisdiction over 430,000 square kilometers, grew "faster than any other state in history," to over 15 million kilometers in 1700. In most instances this expansion did not occur peacefully. Where the eastern drive into Siberia was undertaken and consolidated at relatively low cost, conquest in the western, European portion of Muscovy brought constant warfare with Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, the Crimean Tatars and others. "Although Muscovy ultimately won a great deal and almost never lost anything, its enemies were constantly attacking

— trying to nibble away either at Muscovite territory or its population. The response ultimately was the garrison state."

### The Asiatic Model

When it came to fulfilling military needs, Hellie contends that Muscovite practices were "Asiatic." Rather than relying on banks or money-lenders, the state resorted to requisitioning needed funds. The central authorities were also reluctant to delegate jurisdiction to lower organs over the most minute details relating to military security. One example: In 1655 a storm destroyed the lock on the gate of a provincial fortress, and instead of simply repairing the lock on his own, the local commander wrote to Moscow asking what he should do. "As far I can tell," said Hellie, "local and individual initiative were never allowed to play a role in military matters in the seventeenth century."

"In the social sphere the expansion of the state's potential and real power was breathtaking," Hellie noted. He pointed out that in 1450 Muscovy was a relatively free society with restrictions placed only on slaves. Although social mobility was slow, most people could live and work as they pleased with little intervention from above. This is in sharp contrast to the situation two centuries later, when a rigid caste system permeated Muscovite society and where birth determined social status and often geographical residence. In the intervening years, peasants had been ensnared, townspeople bound to their towns and given monopolies over trade and industry, and even merchants and clerks were enclosed in caste-like corporations. The state also fostered new groups of military men who were given either landed estates (confiscated from their previous owners) or government stipends. In exchange, they were pledged to lifetime military service, as were their male children.

To enforce these measures, local city officials had lists of all residents of a particular district; they watched over everyone, making it difficult for anyone to flee. Moreover, "in a remarkable display of state power, the government ran



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dragnets through much of the country and returned thousands of fugitive serfs and slaves as well." In the interplay between state and society the state was overwhelmingly powerful, remaking society through governmental edict. The creation of a "semi-caste" society in Muscovy in the middle of the seventeenth century was "the most dramatic, the most complete, and the most total change of any society affected by state fiat in human history up until that time."

The state's position was far less commanding in commerce and economic life. Besides limitations on who could work in some occupations, most trade, small-scale manufacturing and agriculture took place with little or no state intervention. The state was a major purchaser of many items, but Hellie's impression is that the state ordinarily paid market prices. The state, however, was a major source of technological innovation and oversaw the exchange of this technology from the state sector to private industry.

### Lack of Institutional Restraints

In the area of inculcating religious beliefs and ethical norms, the state's primary tool was the Orthodox Church. "Throughout this period, the Church was always the handmaiden of the state. Any religious figure who dissented was soon disposed of." The Muscovite state ventured into

numerous private matters, including personal morals, literacy and book censorship.

Hellie attributes the magnitude of the development of state power to a lack of institutional restraints. First, the church was an arm of the state. Second, there was no preexisting sense of "urban exclusiveness or prerogatives until these were developed as a by-product of the Muscovite caste society." In other words, in Russia the autonomous development of towns whose inhabitants would share a collective interest in curbing state authority was conspicuously absent; the state oversaw and regulated urban development. Third, there were no small landowners, thus no gentry. Finally, the potential aristocrats were princes whose "pretensions for power were liquidated upon joining the Muscovite fold. They never had independent aristocratic strivings, for they were the state."

Hellie compared the Muscovite state to a hotel burglar who goes around rapping on doors until he finds one unlocked, which he can open unchallenged. In the period 1450-1700, though, Muscovy often did not need to break in — it was invited. Hellie noted "the state that was created in the Muscovite period did not exist prior to 1450. Its role in nearly all spheres by 1700 was enormous, and its legacy persists down to the present day."

*Reported by Robert Monyak*

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